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The Diversity We Are Given: Community Economies and the Promise of Bataille

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Abstract: For over 20 years J K Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective have endeavoured to reveal the diversity of economic practice already operative in our so-called capitalist world. The aim of this paper is to further this ambition by illuminating an occlusion in Gibson-Graham's own political vision. It argues that diversity, in Gibson-Graham's thought, is primarily conceptualised as something produced. Drawing upon the work of George Bataille, this paper conceptualises the economy as a superlative and prodigal system of energy exchange that, by definition, is over-productive and wasteful. In this framing, diversity is not the result of positive relations but emerges from the prolific nature of the general economy. The idea is developed through a discussion of the Detroit urban farming movement. Specifically it argues that the inefficient, redundant and wasteful nature of urban farming is an appropriation of potentialities resident within the general economy.

Keywords: diverse economies, community economies, JK Gibson-Graham, Bataille, Detroit, resilience

Unproductive Glory

The Detroit neighbourhood of St Cyril was a vibrant working class community for most of the 20th century. Located in the cradle of the auto-industry between I-94 and the Grand Trunk rail-line, it was settled by Slovak miners in the early 1900s who, with the leadership of Father Joseph Zalibera, raised enough money by 1926 to build the impressive Byzantine church for which the neighbourhood would come to be named. In the 1950s and 1960s St Cyril had a population of about 20,000 people and was one of the most prominent Slovak communities in the United States. Today, however, a few occupied homes are scattered around streets that are mostly vacant. Grass pushes itself up through concrete cracks and telephone poles are lost in the encroaching forest. While the population of St Cyril had been declining since the 1980s, the remaining homes were cleared in 2003, along with the church, to make room for a new industrial park that was never built. Its existence now is a matter of record rather than landscape. What one sees here is the unexceptional movement of living forces; trees and grass blossoming through the old porches and wooden roofs, ivy slowly decomposing the cement and clay.

When I was a child growing up in the nearby suburb of Southfield, the story of Detroit had been about failure; about what the philosopher George Bataille

(1985, 1989) might call its unproductive glory. The themes of these stories were recurring and familiar: a belligerent mayor and an inept city council; failing schools, municipal debt and deteriorating services; misappropriated funds, haphazard investment and wasted public finances; budget busting developments and extravagant downtown vanity projects. My parents had no nostalgia for white rule nor did they narrate their laments in the terminology of laziness and indolence that often accompanied Detroit's characterisation as a black city. There was plenty of productivity to be found in Detroit: the car factories still ran, the churches were active, drug dealing was lucrative and the city had high rates of teenage pregnancy. Rather, the story of Detroit concerned its profligacy: its extravagant capacity to waste money, energy and lives in unorganized and inefficient labour and industry. This is a theme that remains very potent today. As stories of Detroit's ruination have grown beyond the confines of family gatherings, a steady stream of photographers, artists and filmmakers have descended on the city to explore "the state of ruin", "the end of empires" and the "fragility of time" (see Marchand and Meffre 2010). The spectacle of rubble and destruction that currently characterises Detroit has turned the city into capitalism's Antigone. Whether in the guise of fashionable Bohemian ennui or as a didactic tale about consumerism and its wreckage, the spectacular story of ruin and waste in Detroit has captured an international audience (Millington 2013).

For Bataille (1989), the event of waste and ruin in Detroit while no doubt spectacular, is by no means extraordinary. Waste, in Bataille, is not an unfortunate by-product of growth or even an aberration. On the contrary, waste is an ontological condition, a process inherent to all living systems and things. The point is not simply that life is wasteful but that living, in its essence, is a process of wasting, a ceaseless process of energy expenditure. Pointless and recurrent growth is the nature of things and this basic idea provides the cornerstone for his economic philosophy. For Bataille, the capitalist economy is not conceptualised as an agent or engine of growth but an attempt to harness forces already deemed to be prodigal. Thus, what we normally refer to as the economy (i.e. specific mechanisms and processes of production and consumption), is actually an effect of a more generalised (and more primary) process. Growth is an unstoppable profligate force. And the economy is an attempt to rationalise and exploit this energy.

The aim of this paper is to consider the conceptual implications of thinking about the economy as ontologically prodigal for the diverse economies literature of J K Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011) and the community economies collective (CEC) (Cameron and Gibson 2005; Healy 2015; Hill 2011; St Martin 2001). Drawing inspiration from Bataille and the superlative economy of urban farming in Detroit Michigan, it endeavours to tease out some of the untapped theoretical potential that inheres in the CEC literature in order to widen its conception of diversity (also see Yang 2000). The specific argument is that the theoretical inclinations of the CEC operate with what Bataille would call a restricted conception of the economy. This is to say that the economy is understood as a system of social relations assembled to produce positive outcomes. What the diverse economy literature does well is illuminate the many kinds of restricted economies that are possible if we are creative in thinking through how,

why and for whom we produce and consume. Bataille's point, however, is that the full potential of restricted economies can only be understood if we see them as responses to a world whose resources are unrelentingly excessive. The farmer toiling the field is not producing food but managing a process. Her job is to curtail, destroy and inhibit superlative energies while allowing a limited range of others to prosper. While the restricted economy names the structures and mechanisms that we use to capture and curtail, Bataille is interested in the primordial energies that engender growth in the first place—what he terms general economy.

His archetype example of a general economy is the sun: "the origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun", Bataille states; "the sun gives without ever receiving. Men were conscious of this long before astrophysics measured that ceaseless prodigality" (1989:28).¹ Bataille's statement links two key aspects about the general economy. First, it is prodigal: it is the origin of all our wealth and a gift whose beneficence we appropriate and enjoy. Second, it is non-reciprocal. As Bataille states, the sun gives without receiving. While it is infinitely generous to all manner of social and biological appropriations, its power is never subsumed by those uses. On the contrary, the sun always stands outside how it is used—untouched by its utility. While I discuss these features of the general economy in greater depth later, the central argument of the paper is that the general economy provides a means to see diversity beyond what subjects, society and non-human systems produce. By understanding what we normally take as the economy as a system for managing and dispensing superlative energies—rather than as a system of positive production—we come to see the potential residing within the neutral, the torpid and the non-productive. There is no doubt much to be said and celebrated about how communities and ecologies assemble to produce, distribute and consume, but the economy is more than what is assembled. It is also what is given. The aim of this paper is to explore how the beneficence of the general economy allows us to see forms of economic diversity that might be missed by focusing solely on positive social relations.

The paper is divided into six further sections. The next two sections elucidate what I will call the positivist bias in Gibson-Graham's work and that of the CEC more broadly. While I am a committed advocate of Gibson-Graham's ambition to deconstruct the economy and reveal its diversity, these sections illustrate how her conception of the economy is understood primarily in positivist terms. The following section focuses on explaining Bataille's theory of the economy and his concept of the general economy in particular. The last two sections before the conclusion move on to illustrating the utility of Bataille's framework through a discussion of urban farming in Detroit. By comparing a general economy perspective on urban farming to those ordinarily used by the CEC, the paper illuminates an alternative conceptual framework for seeing economic diversity.

Diverse Economies

The purpose of the next two sections is to review some of the staple intellectual commitments that run through the CEC literature and illustrate how they

configure a particular perspective on the economy. While there have been a number of theoretical developments in the CEC literature over the last two decades, one can detect an ongoing commitment to theories that I would describe as broadly *positivist*. To be clear, I am not using this term in its traditional Comtian sense, i.e. positivism as a fidelity to verifiable knowledge and scientific process. Rather, I am using it in its Foucauldian sense, i.e. positivism as a commitment to uncovering conglomerations of discourse and practice that produce certain truth effects (Foucault 1972; also see Agamben 2009). This section focuses on reviewing the CEC literature on its own terms and the next section focuses on its positivist bias. I have organised the review around three theoretical phases in the CEC literature (for a discussion of these phases, see Gibson-Graham 2008; Healy 2015; St Martin et al. 2015), each of which is identified with the following key texts: (1) *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (henceforth *EOC*), (2) *Post-Capitalist Politics* (henceforth *PCP*) and (3) *Making Other Worlds Possible* (henceforth *MOWP*).

Anyone familiar with the core ideas of the CEC have most likely engaged at some point with Gibson-Graham's first monograph *EOC* (1996). It is here that Gibson-Graham reveals the implications of what she terms capitalocentric discourse: political narratives that presume all economic activity to be somehow related to capital accumulation. The irony of capitalocentric discourse, she argues, is it creates its own monster. In the process of rendering all economic practices as capitalist, capitalocentric discourse not only ignores (if not belittles) the ingenuity of creative forms of production, but twists such actions into coping mechanisms responding to an incontestable economic system. In this manner, capitalocentric discourse presents capitalism as a totalising system, omni-present to its critics, and natural and pre-ordained to its advocates. The key to resisting this discourse, Gibson-Graham argues, is refusing to accept its terms. Through narrative practices that insist on seeing, acknowledging and affirming economic diversity "we begin to see this monolithic and homogeneous Capitalism not as our 'reality' but as a fantasy of wholeness, one that operates to obscure diversity and disunity in the economy and society alike?" (1996:260).

While *EOC* was certainly a political book, its emphasis was deconstructive. In other words, it focused on opening up the closed discourses of capitalist critique in order to reveal their conceptual and political shortcomings. It was not until her second book *PCP* (2006) that Gibson-Graham introduces ways to operationalise her deconstructive politics. Drawing upon Butler (1993), Foucault (1978) and Varela (1999), Gibson-Graham argues that acknowledging and affirming labouring practices that fall outside our normal categories of worth (caring, coaching, being a good citizen or community leader, etc.), can develop new labouring identities that are "aware of and open to possibilities of change" (2006:129). Thus, rather than identity being "something to be policed and maintained" it becomes "a site of becoming and potential connection" (2006:129). The transformative potential of this framework comes to the fore when she discusses the concept of social surplus. For Marx, the struggle over the appropriation and distribution of surplus labour is at the heart of political struggle. If, however, our notion of labour can transcend the quantifiable confines of earning a wage, then all kinds of world-sustaining surpluses potentially come to the fore. For example, we can explore

how labour associated with care can produce a surplus of comfort and security; how labour associated with community can produce surpluses of friendship and solidarity; and labour associated with skill building can produce surpluses of wonder, imagination and creativity. Such forms of surplus lie outside traditional Marxist imaginations and transcend calculative reasoning. As Gibson-Graham suggests, “in a diverse economy, it is the capacity to produce social surplus in a variety of forms, and not just surplus value, that is of interest, as it is these surpluses that can be used to replenish and expand the commons” (2006:95).

The final and most recent development in the CEC literature is exemplified by *MOWP* (2015). As the editors make clear, *MOWP* is the conceptual handmaiden to the more popular and experimental volume *Take Back the Economy* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). While both highlight the nuts and bolts of recognising, fostering and amplifying experimental economic relations, *MOWP* is squarely focused on developing the conceptual groundwork that makes a diverse economy. If the first book (*EOC*) focused on deconstructing capitalistic discourse, taking its guiding light from Derrida (1978), and the second book (*PCP*) focused on cultivating new imaginations of the self, taking its guiding light from Foucault (1978), *MOWP* focuses on developing the relational ontology that binds subject, practice, economy and society and takes its guiding light from actor-network theory (ANT) (Callon 1997; Callon et al. 2007; Latour 1993). To be clear, this does not constitute a conceptual change of heart for the CEC. It is more that ANT provides a novel theoretical language to describe the capacity of performative acts to proliferate inventive social relations. Given that *MOWP* is an edited book (rather than a monograph) there are obviously a number of conceptual trajectories mooted. But I would suggest that the shift to relational ontologies ushered in developments in two distinct areas. First, *MOWP* deepens the CEC’s approach to relationality. While *PCP* emphasises the networks and responsibilities embedded in all economic relations, *MOWP*’s sketches out an ontology that illuminates and deepens these connections. Second, it decentres the role of the human. Rather than the identity oriented politics we found in *PCP*, *MOWP* is more focused on caring for the assemblage than caring for the self (Healy 2015; see Gibson et al. 2015). As Roelvink suggests, the aim is to displace “the human as the sole autonomous independent agent of economic action” and focuses on exploring how “economic assemblages ... coevolve” (2015:227–228).

The Limits of Positivism

The argument presented here is not that the literature above represents a realist ontology or a commitment to scientific approaches. Again, this is not how I am using the term positivism. Indeed, Gibson-Graham is quite damning of this tradition and decidedly aligns herself to feminist and post-structural positions (e.g. Derrida 1978; Foucault 1978; Nancy 1991; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Sedgwick 2008). On the contrary, the way I am conceptualising positivism concerns the inclination to understand society as something that positively generates itself through the production of epistemologies. In this framing, most everything about society (if not the world) is produced (performed, narrated and/or assembled)

through positive social action. I reveal this positivist bias in three areas of CEC work: its conception of (1) the subject, (2) the environment and (3) relations. I discuss each of these in turn.

In terms of Gibson-Graham's conception of the subject, the positivist bias is not surprising given the CEC's commitment to both individual and social change. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of feminist literature is the intimacy between the personal and political and that one cannot reform the latter without addressing the former (England 1994; Mohanty 1995). One sees this commitment most obviously in *PCP* where Foucault's (1978) notion of "caring for the self" plays a prominent role. In *PCP*, the self is conceptualised as always becoming, and thus, perpetually open to other possibilities for being. While I agree that subjectivity is an open and unfolding project, I would emphasize that subjectivity is as much shaped by its limits as it is by its opportunities (see Rose 2011, 2014). When subjects engage in the politics of food they are no doubt re-shaping the contours of their subjectivity. But those decisions are also driven by non-negotiable needs. Subjects must eat and hunger is not subject to political decisions (Derrida 1991). While the question of how hunger is addressed can be politicised, hunger itself cannot. As a dimension of our existence, there is no choice to be made about whether we are or are not hungry. Even the extreme example of hunger striking does not defeat hunger. On the contrary, it is the ultimate act of submission (see Anderson 2010). Hunger itself is never made subject to human willing or choosing. We are always at its beckoning and always under its power. Thus, while there is no doubt a positive politics to be organised around food, that politics is undergirded by a more primordial negativity—a limit that can be overlooked by the celebration of creative political action.

In terms of a positivist approach to the environment, the emphasis on human non-human interdependence is thought to engender what Gibson-Graham and Roelvink term a recuperative stance: a perspective that is attentive to "the entirety of human non-human conditions of the world that affect us and from which we learn" (2010:322). The hope is that by learning to be attentive to these relations, we become more "receptive and hospitable, animated by care for the world and its inhabitants" (2005:324; also see Gibson-Graham 2006:6). Yet, the fact that non-human agencies sustain our lives does not mean we have any claim on them. While the world gives humans resources for living and enjoyment, this does not mean that those resources are available for us to care for. To what extent can we care for the wind? Our subjectivity is no doubt shaped by the wind—as we can enjoy a cool breeze or curse an icy gust—and the wind is something we can appropriate and put to use. But is it something we can learn to be attentive to? Is it something we can nurture and sustain? The wind, like much of the world, is outside us. And the fact that we can affect it through anthropogenic processes is not to say that we have any claim on how those effects will materialise. Indeed, rather than understanding the world as something under our care, I would suggest the world is something to which we are exposed and the changes that we are inflicting upon it are at our peril.

The final area where we notice the positivism of the CEC is in their conception of relationality. In *MOWP* in particular there is an interest in exploring how

assembled relations make ethical ventures work. As Healy suggests, if we understand the economy as “composed of discernible ... assemblages rather than external or global forces beyond reach, then it becomes possible to trace how these assemblages emerge, are maintained, and shift over time. Furthermore, it becomes possible to intervene in the process, to performatively participate in the assemblage of ... diverse economies” (2015:103). My concern with this approach is that there is an implied correspondence between the assembled agents that constitute an economy (the conglomeration of subjectivities, materialities and forms of labour) and the various forms of surplus that emerge. The issue becomes particularly clear when we consider the role of social surpluses like friendship, solidarity, obligation, and care. Can such dynamics be produced? I am not doubting that a certain approach to social relations (economical or not) can foster such feelings (and do so better than other approaches), but this is not the same as saying they can be produced, distributed and/or consumed. Indeed, does not the concept of social surplus identify those dynamics that transcend the economic? In this light, it is not surprising that the examples of alternative economies so often revolve around community enterprises. The worker’s cooperative in Mondragon Spain, for instance, is used in *PCP* to illustrate how surpluses can be distributed to foster a range of community initiatives and world-sustaining practices. But the actual surplus being distributed is still surplus capital. This is not to suggest that Mondragon does not augment, expand and generally increase feelings of community, friendship and creativity. But can we explain those feelings through a set of distributive economic relations? One could also imagine positive feelings of community and friendship being produced by unjust economic processes such as the shared experience of exploitation and oppression. In this sense, the CEC inclination to illuminate the positive effects emerging from interacting agencies and conglomerations inclines it to see assemblages as things that *work*. Yet, in starting from particular outcomes, it is inclined to miss the breakdowns, misfires and failures inherent to inter-acting agencies as well as the events that may emerge from negative conditions such as inaction or hesitation.

At its heart, the critique being developed here concerns the inclination to understand economy as a set of positive relations, i.e. relations that can be manipulated to produce certain outcomes. What is so compelling about the CEC literature is that so much is possible and it is not my intention to shout “No”. On the contrary, what I am attempting to illuminate is that the CEC penchant for positivism engenders its own obscurities and occlusions. The next section on Bataille introduces an alternative perspective on the economy that works to generate a different set of openings. In introducing this perspective my hope is not to undermine the political or conceptual ambitions of the CEC or its positive approach to political possibility, but rather to expand those ambitions by illustrating other ways to find diversity.

Excessive Economies

If the aim of the previous two sections was to illustrate CEC’s positivist bias, i.e. its emphasis on how agencies create, assemble and change, the aim of this section is

to show how Bataille's work provides another way to envision the economy and the forms of diversity existing therein. To begin, I want to return to the distinctive manner that Bataille thinks about the sun. For Bataille, the sun is a system of molecular exchange whose positive result is heat and light which dissipate into the emptiness of space. There is nothing inherently productive or positive about fusion. It is not as if the sun gains from it or somehow evolves or is augmented by its own burning. The sun is simply the outcome of a redundant process, i.e. hydrogen converting to helium as long as the hydrogen remains. The sun exemplifies the general economy in two ways. First, the sun is wasteful. It is excessive, overflowing and superlative and yet also self-limiting; its productivity leading only towards its own extinction. Second, the sun is sovereign. It serves no function in and of itself. It has no purpose nor reason. It simply is what it does. Together these features shift our orientation from thinking of the sun in terms of its significance for life on earth to thinking about it as a process that is its *own*—separate and distinct from how it is used. While the sun gives and gives supremely, its sovereignty is predicated on the fact that it is always more than its giving; its being is more than the infinite ways it is appropriated and put to task. This, for Bataille, is the essence of the general economy: the "movement of energy that we use, but that is not reducible to its utility" (1989:69). There are two further points I want to make about these two definitional terms (i.e. waste and sovereignty).

First, there is a certain duplicity to Bataille's concept of waste. On the one hand, Bataille is situating the general economy as a system of exuberant energy and vital force. In this sense, it would seem to share much in common with the vitalist sensibilities of Foucault and ANT. Indeed, as Doel (2009) suggests, Bataille's work is an explicit repudiation not only of Marxist political economy, a tradition that presumes *a lack* of excess in the world, but any ontology that begins from a position of scarcity, insufficiency and depletion (also see Sorensen 2012). At the same time, I would argue we need to be careful of equating Bataille's vitalism with positivity. For Bataille, the overflowing energies that service life equally service death. While the evolutionary biologist may wonder at the precision by which particular creatures become suited to their environment, Bataille sees a catastrophic waste of energies; millennia of trial and error representing a dark and ostentatious process. For every evolutionary success there is a massive multiplication of the failed and the dead. In this sense, although Bataille understands the universe as ontologically wired to produce and expend energy, it does so without direction, purpose or cause. Regardless of how often the gardener clears a path, life always returns, covering it over with weeds and bushes that need to be cut back again and again (see Bataille 1989:31). It is the *modus operandi* of living systems to over-expend energy and it is by such means that life colonises whatever opportunities it finds. But it is a process predicated on a relentless process of unmitigated waste and death (Bush 2015).

Second, Bataille's conception of sovereignty situates the relation between the general economy and the restricted economies as non-reciprocal (Lechte 2017). As already suggested, restricted economies are assemblages—of narratives, practices, ecologies—that exist by virtue of the general economy's beneficence. While the general economy gives, the restricted economy takes. The latter does not give

back to the former. In this sense, there is no proper relation between the two—or at best it is a relation of non-relation (Harrison 2007). The general economy and the restricted economy do not properly connect.

The purpose of elaborating these features of the general economy is to illustrate how Bataille's concept of the general economy turns traditional economic theory on its head. If we approach the economy from the perspective of its appropriations, that is, if we see the economy only in its restricted sense (as an assemblage of discourses, technologies and agencies), then the economy looks like a system of production. This is Bataille's primary critique. As Hegarty suggests, "Bataille ... challenges the belief held by both capitalism and communism in the primacy of 'the economic', where the economic is the sphere of production" (2000:33). In response, Bataille does not see production as something that originates in human agency or as an outcome of social relations. Rather all productivity emerges from the general economy, i.e. the excess that the general economy gives and which all beings seek to appropriate, distribute and dispense. The point, to be clear, is not that the economy *is not* social. On the contrary, human-centred restricted economies are wholly social enterprises and there is much to be said (and done) about how such economies are organised. But this is not the same as saying that the economy *is* a social product, i.e. that it is ours to manipulate, organise and possess. In this sense, the aim of this section has been to outline a conception of the economy that is understood not in terms of forces of production, but rather, in terms of excessive energies that are sovereign. Only in this light can we see the economy as something we appropriate and borrow, rather than mobilise and assemble. The economy, in short, is not *ours*—not ours to give nor ours to take. Its origin resides in agencies that are outside us, i.e. outside society and outside relations. It is not simply non-human but non-worldly; and while we can receive and appropriate what the general economy gives, we cannot refuse its gifts. On the contrary, we are beholden to them and exist at their discretion.

The Diverse Economy of Urban Farming

The final two sections focus on illustrating how Bataille's conception of the general economy can advance the theoretical repertoire of the CEC beyond its positivist inclinations. It does this by sketching out the dynamics of a particular case study (this section) and then illustrating how the general economy allows us to view this case in a distinctive light. To be clear, the point is not to empirically illustrate a theory (the story told here is speculative and rudimentary) but to exemplify what Bataille's thought can potentially do. The focus of the discussion is the Detroit urban farming (DUF) movement which I have researched for the last five years.² In this section I provide a brief sketch of DUF, focusing on what I take to be its two distinctive features: (1) it is prolific and diverse, and (2) it is highly inefficient.

In terms of DUF's diversity, the extensive nature of DUF is well established even as it eludes precise quantification (see Colasanti et al. 2012; Pothukuchi 2011, 2015). Giorda (2016) estimates that there are currently over 300 neighbourhood allotments in the city and around 20 multi-acre farms. In my interview with

Ashley Atkinson, director of Keep Growing Detroit, she estimated her organisation supports over 20,000 Detroit growers. However, it would be a mistake to understand the popularity of DUF as indicative of a consolidated movement. DUF is a highly diverse phenomenon consisting of a wide variety of actors farming for an equally wide variety of reasons. To try and capture some of this diversity I have created three categories that describe some of the different motivations behind urban farming in the city. These are neighbourhood gardens, community farms and entrepreneurial farms.

Neighbourhood gardens are the most prevalent farms in Detroit. Usually they can be characterised by a small allotment (e.g. 15 square metres), gardened by 6–10 families mostly for neighbourhood consumption. While the neighbourhood groups are often politicised (they discuss food inequality, food justice, environmental degradation, etc.), it would be a misrepresentation to characterise their activities as part of an overt social movement. Primarily the gardens were created to combat vacancy and increase access to fresh food at the local level. Community farms, in contrast, were established with distinctive political agendas in mind. These farms are larger (2–7 acres) enterprises run by non-profit organisations with volunteer labour. Examples include The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), Earthworks Farm and Freedom Freedom. These organisations are the most visible and perhaps most representative of Gibson-Graham's conception of a community economy in that their modes of production, distribution and consumption are designed to promote social objectives such as food sovereignty (see Cameron 2015; Cameron et al. 2014). While community farms work together at times, their collaborations are episodic and project driven rather than systemic and ongoing. The final category are entrepreneurial farms, exemplified by Brother Nature, Food Field and Rising Pheasant. As for profit enterprises, these differ from the community farms above. But they are also heavily involved in philanthropic activities so in terms of their activities it is often difficult to tell them apart.

These categories give some sense of the different agendas informing DUF, but they also make the phenomenon seem more consolidated than is warranted. The sheer number of people involved in DUF suggests that the practice embeds a wide array of interests. While my formal interviews with NGO leaders and garden coordinators elicited clear narratives about DUF's role and contribution to the city, volunteer days revealed far more dispersed motivations. For example, DBCFSN has a strong narrative about the history of racial injustice in relation to food and the need to empower the black community (also see White 2011). But DBCFSN volunteers farm for a variety of reasons—e.g. they were against the corporate food system, they saw farming as a religious duty or they wanted a nice day out. The point is that DUF is wrapped up in personal and political values, interests and agendas that circulate around the practice without defining it.

The second defining feature of DUF is that it is inherently and self-consciously inefficient. This can be seen in at least two areas: (1) it is a high-labour low-yield activity, and (2) there is little interest in consolidation and coordination. In terms of the former, DUF is heavily reliant on volunteer labour. Neighbourhood gardens are exclusively staffed by the families that tend them and community farms rely

extensively on volunteers. During a volunteer day at Earthworks I was joined by a dozen others, a number of whom were part of an organised group. Similarly my volunteer days at D-Town farm (run by Detroit Black Food Security Network) was shared with a group of regulars in the morning and after-school groups in the afternoon. In terms of the efficiency of this process, Conner and Rangarajan (2009) argue that the labour input on a typical organic farm, at the labour intensive end of the spectrum, equates to roughly 800 hours per acre. In a recent report from Earthworks they estimate that their 1.5 acre farm received 6000 hours of volunteer support (Pothukuchi 2011). While this may appear as a critique of the Earthworks business model, this is only because the term inefficiency is preconceived to be pejorative. For the farmers themselves, nothing could be further from the truth. Earthworks would never turn away volunteer labour because it was unnecessary or redundant. On the contrary, community engagement is one of its priorities.

The second area of inefficiency is the lack of consolidation and coordination among growers. At the neighbourhood level, this lack of coordination is understandable given that growing is micro-local, spread out over a large geographic area and most of the food stays within the neighbourhood. At the community and entrepreneurial level, however, one might expect to see greater cooperation and coordination, particularly in relation to logistics, training and the use of capital equipment. What is also interesting is how third sector funding is similarly uncoordinated. As a consultant who worked for the Kresge foundation (a major contributor to urban farming) told me, the entire sector operates within its own silos, with little concern for what is happening outside them. The reason for this silo-isation could be linked to the nature of project-based third sector funding, the lack of state or municipal investment or even historical antagonisms within the city (see Bockmeyer 2000; Dewar 2006). In either case, the lack of coordination was something the farmers themselves noticed but were not concerned about. Informants were not against more cooperation but when asked about the issue they often reiterated their own particular mission.

It is no doubt possible to read DUF as a potent illustration of diverse economies at work. The relations that characterise DUF are driven by ethical principles where questions of responsibility are primary and fostering community is a sustained goal (see Cameron 2015). But something would be lost by such a framing. There is something distinctive about the way that organisations involved in DUF work together and work apart, combining and separating as the mood and situation fits. The issue is not simply one of scale or institutional capacity, but whether community economies can be thought of in terms other than positive political action. Is it possible to think community economies (in general) and urban farming (in particular) as expending energy rather than generating it? And if so what would such a framework add? In short, what does a theory of general economy do for the diverse economies literature?

The Sovereignty of Diversity

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this project is the same as Gibson-Graham's and the CEC's—i.e. to make the diverse economy visible. This means

showing how Bataille's theory of general economy can illuminate social and ethical potentialities that might not be seen from a positivist perspective. To do this I make two points. First, I put forward a speculative argument concerning the inefficient, overlapping and redundant nature of DUF and how it may be producing a resilient regional food system. While I have data to suggest that such a correlation exists in Detroit, proving the relation would be a different paper.³ The aim of *this* paper is to illustrate how a different ontological starting point has a significant effect on how the question of resilience is approached and whether its dynamics can be seen. In this sense, the argument serves as a proxy to illustrate the approach. This leads to the second point which compares the positivist perspective of the CEC to the superlative perspective of Bataille. My argument is that the concept of the general economy brings resilience into view as a potential guaranteed by the imposition of excessive sovereign energies. This is not to say that resilience itself is guaranteed (that question is still a question of calculation). The point is that the general economy assures that redundancy and waste reside in the economy as a potential; a set of possible social and ethical relations that may never be assembled but whose potentiality is pre-established by the economy's superlative energies and its infinite capacity to be diverse.

In terms of the first argument, the relation between redundancy and resilience is based on a theory from ecology. As Peterson et al. argue, "ecological resilience is generated by diverse, but overlapping, function within a scale" (1998:6). The more overlapping functions operating in a system, the less vulnerable it is to destruction and/or degradation. If there are many tributaries feeding a watershed, then the deterioration of a proportion of those tributaries does not lead to the catastrophic loss of the watershed as a whole. Resilience depends on this functional overlap. What makes a system resilient is the presence of multiple agencies doing the same thing. As Walker and Salt suggest, redundant systems anticipate failure. When one input fails, others (doing similar or the same work) keep the system going. "The cost of efficiency" they argue "is a loss in flexibility. Different ways of performing the same function (redundancy) are eliminated in favour of doing the function in ... the most efficient way" (2006:71). The relationship between resilience and redundancy relates to DUF because DUF is often described (by its critics and its advocates) as inefficient. As discussed in the previous section, it is high-labour, low-yield, uncoordinated and often wasteful. In this sense, it would be interesting to explore to what extent the unique manner of farming that DUF represents is engendering a resilient regional food system. The aim here is not to answer this question but to compare the different ways it might be approached.

From a CEC perspective, I would suggest that their interest in how community needs and values can be mobilised to structure relations of production, distribution and consumption engenders a certain blindness to economic potentialities that are not an explicit part of the community's intentions. *If* DUF is enhancing resilience, it is not because its participants are fostering assemblages (particular modalities of farming) that allow waste and redundancy to prosper. The farmers are not producing waste intentionally (their remit or self-understanding does not include producing a surplus of waste) and redundancy, in and of itself, is not an

ambition or desire. This is not to suggest that it cannot be made into a desire but no sooner is that question raised than we are tasked with the challenge of exploring, analysing and understanding the kinds of wastes that need to be produced and the kind of social relations that must be mobilised to produce them.⁴ In other words, questions about how to build, create and produce rather than how to see, acknowledge and borrow.

If, however, we conceptualise waste from the perspective of the general economy, then waste is the nature of things; it is the condition of an economy that is superlative. In this framing, the farmers can be seen to be appropriating the general economy's energies in a manner that fosters and promotes waste. To be clear, this is not the same as arguing that farmers are producing waste. The fact that farmers put soil and seed together does *not* situate them as the makers of food or waste. What DUF assembles are forces whose appearance arrive from elsewhere; forces that they can see and enrol but whose origin is outside them and whose potential exceeds their intentions. Thus, sun, soil and seed can engender a multitude of potential restricted economies and it is their sovereignty—the fact that they sit outside our command—that guarantees their infinite potential. This is not to question the human capacity to farm or our human influence on the resources that allow food to grow. But it is to suggest that human capacities are ultimately limited. The sun is not ours to turn on and off; we cannot chemically fertilise the soil forever; and we cannot gene splice our way out of the need for seeds. While humans, more than other beings, endeavour to lift their reliance on what the world gives, there will always be limits. We will always live at the world's behest. To see the economy in such terms means moving away from seeing it in terms of what we as a society or community can or should produce and instead seeing it as a potential that inheres in our sovereign world.

Such a perspective not only leads to a different conception of agency, but also a distinctive approach to ethics. From a CEC perspective, the ethical nature of the economy is measured by the extent to which it produces just social relations. At the bottom of this conception is the presumption that we (as a community and society) have the choice to be or not be ethical; a choice about whether we are willing to recognise the suffering that our economic actions cause. Hence, so many of our political efforts are driven by revealing the unseen ethical implications of our economy—e.g. the images of glaciers melting, plastics floating and people starving. This is a politics of revealing what would otherwise be invisible. Again, however, I would argue that the invisibility of suffering is a consequence of understanding the economy in restricted terms. From the perspective of the restricted economy, economic choices are a marker of our individual freedom—i.e. our freedom to make (or not make) ethical decisions or see (or not see) ethical consequences. And when the economy is explicitly built to promote social justice and minimise inequality such decisions are understood to be a reflection of our freedom to make a choice—i.e. to be responsible.

From the perspective of the general economy, however, we are very much not free. On the contrary, the economy imposes itself on us and we are at its behest, forced to reckon with the opportunities and consequences it levies. While there are choices to be made here—and without question an ethics about how those

choices are made—it cannot be said that we are free to make those choices. On the contrary, we are forced to *make a choice*—i.e. we cannot be inethical about the economy. The economy inflicts itself upon us and we are burdened with making choices about how we distribute those impositions and whether to do so justly. In this sense, we must be cautious about the presumption that we can “make other worlds possible”—or at least cautious about thinking such tasks begin with us or our social relations. The world makes us possible. It imposes itself and we must choose from the limited possibilities it throws at our feet. The ethical push therefore does not come from us and our social relations. On the contrary, the obligation to be ethical is forced by the general economy itself—an economy that gives and (in giving) demands that we respond. This is not to say that the general economy demands that we respond justly. Questions of justice are again questions of calculation and thus questions for social relations. But the general economy *forces* the question of justice upon us in a manner that the restricted economy does not. We are not free to not consider or not consider the ethics of the general economy. The question is imposed upon us from the beginning. Its implications visible from the moment they are received. And it is a question we must answer.

To conclude this section, my argument can be summed up by the idea that the potentiality of the restricted economy is assured by the sovereignty of the general economy. It is because the general economy is non-reciprocal, because we have limited say over what or how it gives, that alterity (and its ethical imperatives) is not only present but imposed. To understand the economy as something that begins and ends through social relations and our capacity to forge those relations in whatever terms we deem to be ethical, is to miss both the potential and ethics of understanding the economy as something that transcends us. What Bataille brings to the CEC literature, in short, is a conception of the economy as sovereign. Social relations and the economies they engender are beholden to that which is outside it. They are exposed to the alterity of the general economy and often oppressively so. In this sense, diversity cannot be seen as something we create, sustain and build, but something we manage, curtail and/or let prosper. In addition, I would argue that it is only when we see the economy in terms other than what is positively assembled and/or produced that we can also see the diversity that is being wasted all around us. Diversity that is always already diversifying, creating, giving. Diversity that awaits our appropriation and care.

A Question of Seeing

The central aim of this paper is to illustrate how thinking diversity solely in terms of positive social relations limits our capacity to recognise what kind of economies are possible. As Gibson-Graham suggests, the economy is only limited by what we can see. The farmers I worked with never talked about resilience. While vague ambitions to produce food security and sovereignty emerged among the litany of other goals and desires, no farmers (unsurprisingly) articulated a desire to cultivate a resilient regional food system through the propagation of waste. It was

something they simply did not see. But just because resilience is not their intention does not mean it cannot be assembled. While Bataille would be loath to characterise the rogue prodigal energies generated by the general economy in positive terms, he would recognise within them an utterly unpredictable agency, that is, a capacity to engender a wide range of both productive and unproductive effects whose potential for politics cannot be predicted or intended. In a system where unintentional surplus is the norm, anything can happen. In this sense, it is precisely among the ruins of unrelenting waste that alternatives can be found. It is only a question of seeing.

To be sure such a perspective has its shortcomings. While I would not term it as anti-humanist, Bataille's economic ontology is nihilistic and in this sense, it might be prudent to ask why we should care about seeing something that is beyond the social. While I have attempted to illustrate some of the advantages, in a broad sense I would argue that this paper stands as a corrective to an inclination in Gibson-Graham's work, and in the CEC more broadly, to push beyond their deconstructive inclinations in order to engage more forthrightly with questions concerning how to build, develop, and proliferate diverse economies. I am not arguing, to be clear, that such questions are unimportant or that they do not constitute a necessary corollary to deconstruction. To witness is to testify and there are ethical obligations that come with facilitating deconstructive events. And yet, when the deconstructive dimension of their work is aligned with the ethical calculations of the restricted economy, something is lost. In this sense, the ethical ambition here is to bring the diverse economies literature back to the point made by Gibson-Graham in her seminal text—i.e. that deconstruction happens, that “the proliferation of difference is under way” (1996:23). Bataille's concept of the general economy is another way of rendering this basic insight—i.e. that our reliance on the world is a reliance on its sovereign offerings; offerings that are outside of our hands and whose gifts are both welcome and disruptive. The alterity of the world—is guaranteed by the world's sovereignty; the pre-ontological dimension that both precedes and allows all economy. In this sense, the aim of this paper is not to shadow or de-emphasize the practical politics of calculating everyday social justice. But it is to emphasize that social justice is not a question of how we are giving but how we are receiving: how do we accept, accommodate, distribute and consume the world's sovereign gifts? This is the ethical question at the heart of our restricted economies. The world is sovereign and will go on regardless of how we answer. But it does demand an answer.

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Endnotes

¹ It is worth noting that there is a long tradition of conceptualising the economy excessively which runs alongside Smith's and Marx's emphasis on scarcity. See Bruni's (2013) work on the 18th century *Economia Civile* school.

² Data collection includes two voluntary placements in Detroit on two separate urban farms, a 2-week secondment to the Eastern Market Corporation (an anchor institution that supports local food production) and 10 formal (and numerous informal) interviews with key actors in the sector. Interviewees represent the following urban farming organisations: Keep Growing Detroit, the Detroit Food Policy Council, the Detroit Black Food Security Network, Earthworks Farm, the Kresge Foundation, Forgotten Harvest, the Eastern Market Corporation and Michigan State University Centre For Regional Food Systems.

³ The concept of resilience is an overburdened one and it is not my intention to get caught up in its diverse and inconsistent uses (though for a discussion, see Anderson 2015; Brown 2013; Bruijine et al. 2010; Simon and Randalls 2016) nor to make a substantive contribution to the resilience literature.

⁴ This paper is not about resilience and I am being cautious about my use of the term, but if I can use a footnote to be speculative I would suggest that this concept is also being over-determined by questions of calculation (Kaika 2017). When understood in its ecological guise, resilience is a dynamic that emerges from forces and energies whose origin resides outside the restricted economy. While this is not to deny that it can be reduced to instrumentalist procedures (what can't?) in doing so the concept loses its conceptual force. Indeed, unlike concepts such as networks or assemblage whose terminology begs us to map and trace, resilience is oriented towards the untraceable and unexpected. It positions subjects not as environmental saviours, but as beings who are beholden to sovereign forces.

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